

MENTORING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: LEARNING AND PERCEIVED NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA ROTARY CLUBS

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Abstract

This paper explores learning in Rotary clubs that have newly allowed women as members. The main focus of the paper is women's perception of learning within the confines of these clubs with respect to mentoring and social capital's existence. The study explores gaps in power within a middle-class Pennsylvania society. This study used phenomenology and grounded theory to investigate the lived experiences of women that are members of Rotary clubs in central Pennsylvania.

Coming to the Problem

This research combines my interests in gender equity with my access to a former all men's civic club called Rotary. The club is known for its community service, academic scholarships, and international service. In 1987, after barring women from joining their ranks, Rotary clubs admitted female members for the first time, giving women equal access to the informal education and networking opportunities that have helped male Rotarians succeed in the workplace for nearly 80 years previously (Rotary International, 2003).

Moustakas (1994) wrote that before preparing to conduct a phenomenological investigation the topic has to have social and personal meaning. This research project explores the existence of social capital and mentoring using muted group (co-cultural), standpoint, and social conflict theories to help interpret the experiences of selected women members of Rotary. The experiences of these women may lead to new findings or cultural processes in mentoring relationships and learning.

Women in Business. Some of the obstacles holding women back were found to be lack of mentoring (Geller & Hobfoll, 1993) and limited access to informal communication networks (Ibarra, 1993). The importance of social capital and building networking ties was written about in Robert Putnam's landmark book, *Bowling Alone*, (Putnam, 2000) "Service clubs like Rotary mobilize local energies to raise scholarships or fight disease at the same time that they provide members with friendships and business connections that pay off personally" (Putnam, 2000, Page 20). In 1987 the Supreme Court of the United States of America ruled that civic clubs, like Rotary, were business networking, social capital building, business establishments, and that to bar any group, including women, from membership would block equal access to business opportunities through business networking.

Women have been excluded many times over from equal access to the rights white males, as United States citizens, are afforded under the United States Constitution. Other indicators of a need for this study include the following points from varied studies including Giselle Rose (Rose, 1999) who wrote in *Fairfield County Woman*, "our 20th century pioneers believed that a woman's image was in need of a drastic overhaul, changing status associated with marital passiveness and naïveté, sexual dutifulness, cultural exploitation, and gender imbalance." The concept of the "good ole' boys network" has never been successfully adapted to the feminine gender. A strong, pervasive "good ole girls network" still eludes women.

There are many more contexts to place the issue being researched. Women have not always had access to these channels of informal education. It is clear from the statistical data, that powerful companies are predominately white and male. To break through the ceiling or escape the floor, communication with these powerful companies has to be made. Informal education via mentoring, building social capital, and back channels of contact, I argue, and the literature supports the notion that education regarding mentoring and building special capital are keys to moving up the economic ladder. Anonymous, 2002; Akerlof, 2000; Anker, 1997; Bell, McLaughlin, and Sequeira, 2002; Benokraitis, and Feagin, 1995; Catalyst, 2000; Dipboye, 1987; Groves, 1996; Lobel, 2000; Martin, 2001; McDonald, and Hite, 1998; Mosely-Braun, 1995; Stroh, Brett, and Reilly, 1992; Welch, 1980.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this project is to explore the lived experiences that contributed to the involvement of women in Rotary clubs in Central Pennsylvania in a manner that allowed a sufficient amount of data for analysis in developing new theory, contribution to expanding existing theory, or corroboration of existing theory in the areas of muted group theory, standpoint theory, and social conflict theory. (Putnam, 2000; Daloz, 1999; Bokeno and Gantt, 2000; Block & Ginsberg, 1993; Hanifan, 1920; Schein, 1978; Wood, 2001; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). Following this purpose, the research question was: Is membership in Rotary, as perceived by women, a vehicle to increase career opportunity?

At the onset of the study I hoped the research would add to what is known regarding male-female relationships and their struggles related to power and how power is used. I hoped the data would lead to new information regarding those with power and those without power. This research could lead, as time passes in a longitudinal version of this research, to determine if relationship power is reversed with men seeking female leaders guidance in new theory regarding a reversal of existing muted group theory. Other areas this research would help were in leading to new theory or new information regarding existing theory in the area of standpoint theories. Existing standpoint theory suggests that powerless groups have access to knowledge that the powerful find unavailable. A third area of contribution by this research project is in the area of social conflict theory. This theory hints at why and what happens when the roles are reversed. The experiences of the women in Rotary that I interviewed may lead to new findings or cultural processes in relationships and learning.

This research attempted to define what social capital means in the context of women in civic clubs that were former male only clubs and the role of power or lack of power in social capital. Accesses to arenas that lead to social capital creation are crucial for leveling the playing field in gender equity issues. Studies have suggested that social capital creates economic value for individuals, organizations, or both (Clark, 2003).

How does social capital begin? A study from 2000 suggests that teaching how to create social capital in high school should be encouraged (Campbell, 2000). Is there a mentoring process that gets it off the ground for individual participants? How is power defined in these relationships? Does the possessor of established networking connections hold power? How is the power shared? Does the younger person in a mentoring relationship have any power through knowledge and potential transfer of newer technologies and methods that improve efficiencies? Power considerations including the access to networking connections and one's hierarchical position in a social network influence the accumulation of social capital (Tucker, Jr., 2002).

Rotary perpetuates its own community by allowing like-minded individuals into the club by invitation only but it also strives to help the community of non-members by serving the public good and simultaneously serving its members.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used to collect data, code, reflect, and review transcripts interviews in order to investigate the meanings of lived experiences of research subjects to determine if the interviews yielded new theory, corroborated or added to existing theory. My research called for interviewing women regarding their experiences in Rotary enabling me to learn what their experiences were like in a fuller, more substantial context. When a substantial extrication occurred from these interviews, my goal was to further develop theories of mentoring and social capital in the areas of contributions to professional growth by membership in a civic club and to add to existing knowledge in the areas of muted group theory and standpoint theory, and possibly in a longitudinal version of this study, social conflict theory.

The research project I conducted borrowed from ethnographical research ideas as described by Geertz in one small way: the ability to learn through interviews with respondents going back to the beginning of time for an issue (Geertz, 2000). In this case the beginning of time as related to Rotary and female membership is the year 1987 when women were first allowed to join Rotary. Otherwise, phenomenological approach to qualitative method was employed fully.

This research project used phenomenology as the appropriate method because it is the study of lived experiences used to recapture the meaning of everyday experience (Foucault, 1994.)

Findings

In this study, all of the respondents in the interviews said that determining whether they were being excluded was difficult to say because if they were being excluded, each would not know the activity was happening. The perspective from all but one respondent said, as a professional, membership and engagement was fulfilling in many ways and that the club was a large part of their life and business now. A 48 years old researcher told me "being in a small town, there are several men who are in the club that probably would never have considered me an equal or at least someone worth inviting into their office."

McDonald and Hite wrote (1998) that a glass ceiling still exists in the work force. I would suggest that the glass ceiling extends to former "men only" civic clubs as well. Whatever the reason, the proverbial glass ceiling is perpetuated onward. I thought I might find, after 15 years of female Rotarian membership, an example of social conflict theory or role reversal theory but no theme in this area was encountered. Why does this happen? Why do men accommodate themselves formally but persist in keeping informal male-only parts just for themselves?

Conclusion and implications for adult education

According to Laurent Daloz, mentoring is fundamentally a learning relationship (Daloz, 1986). Merriam (1983) wrote that creation of a learning environment that is favorable for knowledge transfer is necessary for mentoring to take place. Joining a club like Rotary is beneficial to women in creation of social capital and finding mentors. However, it does not fully level the playing field as far as allowing power to be shared by all groups of any people. As one of the respondents told me, "[Joining Rotary] is the best and maybe the only option available currently to gain equal access to networks [and informal learning channels].

To address this problem of equal access to channels of communication for creation of social capital and mentoring, adult educators need to evaluate these results with additional research. Former men's clubs, like Rotary, are a good start but today the clubs are not enough for power to be shared completely. Rotary and similar clubs, do, however, represent semi-formal institutions that constitute an important staging ground for ongoing stratification. A complete version of this research may be found at <http://home.adephia.net/~jpr111/midwestpaper.pdf>.

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